

DRED: A TALE OF THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP

By Harriet Beecher Stowe

You can read this novel online at: <http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/>

This book was selected for a literary review project of historical fiction, because it is an excellent source to examine the southern culture. Students will have an opportunity to examine the conditions refugees were leaving when they settled in Canada. This will permit students to understand the true significance of the contributions these settlers made. As well, students may better appreciate the importance of the Elgin (Buxton) Settlement in Canadian and world history, as the inspiration for this novel.

Written in 1856, the story occurs in the 1850's in the Carolinas. Although the story occurs in the South, it is written from a Northern perspective with a strong anti-slavery theme. The tale centres on the Gordon family and their society. The story opens when young Nina Gordon, heiress of a plantation, returns south from a boarding school in New York. The reader observes Nina, maturing from a stereotype southern belle into a person of conscience, as she begins to question the social order of her society. Nina is engaged to a young lawyer, Edward Clayton, who is of exceptionally high moral character and from an upper class family.

The novel subplot is the society of slaves seeking refuge in a swamp. Dred, son of Denmark Vessey (who was an emancipated and educated black man that led a revolt, was tried and executed), leads the swamp community and is a prophetic character.

Main characters include:

(Slaves)

Harry - Nina's slave, well educated, and (unknown to her) eldest brother

Cora - Harry's sister, who was freed in Ohio

Lisette- Harry's wife, but owned by another plantation

Milly - Aunt Nesbit's slave

Tomtit- Aunt Nesbit's slave, Milly's grandson

Tiff - slave, who is raising the children of his deceased mistress (Fanny & Teddy)

(Family)

Tom Gordon -Nina's legitimate older brother, possessing low moral character

John Gordon- Nina's uncle and master of the neighbouring plantation

Maria Gordon- Uncle John's wife

Aunt Nesbit - Nina's aunt who is financially dependent on the Gordon's

(Others)

Frank Russel - Edward Clayton's legal partner

Anne Clayton - Edward Clayton's sister

Chronological Order of Main Events:

Tiff comes to the plantation seeking Nina Gordon's assistance; the young woman who was his mistress has died. Tiff raised his young mistress and accompanied her when she married a poor white man.

Edward Clayton visits Nina Gordon at her plantation.

Tom Gordon returns to the plantation drunk and hostile to Harry. Tom threatens Harry's wife Lisette. Tom invites a Mr. Jekyl to visit. Mr. Jekyl convinces Aunt Nesbit to hire out Milly to earn money for Aunt Nesbit to live on. Milly shares her life story with Nina before she leaves.

Dred assists runaways in the swamp.

A camp prayer meeting is organized in the neighbourhood, which is attended by all members of society and lead by ministers of opposing points of view.

Milly returns from her 'hired out' position, because she was hit over the head and shot in the arm. Nina is upset that Milly has been abusively treated and Aunt Nesbit is only concerned that she will be short of funds. Nina asks Edward Clayton if there is any legal recourse to punish the 'master' who hurt Milly.

Edward Clayton wins the local court case, however it is appealed and goes to the Supreme Court where the decision is over turned on the grounds that a master must have absolute authority over a slave to maintain discipline.

Nina visits Anne Clayton who is teaching her slaves to read. Local neighbours who insist she discontinue this dangerous practice approach Miss Clayton.

Nina returns to her plantation full of lofty aspirations, nurses her slaves and neighbours through an outbreak of cholera. Nina is stricken with the disease and dies. Uncle John, Aunt Maria, and Aunt Nesbit all die from cholera.

Edward Clayton begins to settle Nina's affairs. Tom Gordon inherits Nina's estate. Although Harry had been promised his freedom and provided with a contract, the contract is not acknowledged. Harry and Lisette flee the cruelty of Tom Gordon, with Dred into the swamp.

Tiff's master has married a new woman, who is of a low moral fiber and cruel to the children entrusted to Tiff's care. Tiff takes the children and they seek refuge with Dred in the swamp.

Tom Gordon leads a raid of vigilantes to 'warn' a conscientious minister to leave the neighbourhood. As they are whipping the minister, Edward Clayton appears and questions their integrity. The vigilantes beat up Clayton when he leaves the ministers. Dred and Harry take Clayton into the swamp and nurse him back to health.

Milly and other servants from the Gordon plantation escape into the swamp.

Tom Gordon leads a raid into the swamp. Dred is killed. Harry and Edward Clayton organize the refuges into two groups to journey north to Canada.